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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Rattanasengchanh, P. . M. (2017). The Role of Preah Vihear in Hun Sen's Nationalism Politics, 2008-2013. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 36(3), 63-89. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-4-10898>

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# Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs

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Rattanasengchanh, P. Michael (2017),  
The Role of Preah Vihear in Hun Sen's Nationalism Politics, 2008–2013, in:  
*Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 36, 3, 63–89.

URN: <http://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-4-10898>

ISSN: 1868-4882 (online), ISSN: 1868-1034 (print)

The online version of this article can be found at:

**<[www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org](http://www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org)>**

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Published by

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Asian Studies and  
Hamburg University Press.

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# The Role of Preah Vihear in Hun Sen's Nationalism Politics, 2008–2013

P. Michael Rattanasengchanh

**Abstract:** From 2003 to 2013, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen benefitted politically from promoting nationalism through the Preah Vihear dispute between Cambodia and Thailand. In contrast, Thai conservatives had mixed results when they laid claim to Preah Vihear and tried to use the temple to bolster their political positions. When it came to media coverage of the temple and border issue, Thailand's domestic and foreign politics, rather than Cambodia's, dominated the narrative. As a result, both countries engaged in a war of words and several military clashes between 2008 and 2013. Thailand was widely viewed as the instigator and Cambodia as the victim. However, a closer look at Cambodia's reactions to Thailand's provocations reveals an important part of the story. These quarrels and conflicts seemed to arise before major elections in Cambodia. Behind the front lines, Hun Sen used Preah Vihear and a conflict with a historical adversary to build political prestige, nationalism, and anti-Thai sentiments, co-opting it as a part of his political platform. Hun Sen employed the temple and the border dispute in his rhetoric and created public relations events celebrating the government's protection of Cambodia's sovereignty and national prestige. Among other factors, Preah Vihear helped Hun Sen win elections and maintain political power by vilifying Thailand and using nationalism. The temple became a powerful nationalistic symbol.

■ Manuscript received 18 May 2017; accepted 2 January 2018

**Keywords:** Cambodia, Thailand, Preah Vihear, nationalism, anti-Thai, Hun Sen, territory

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## Introduction

The dispute over Preah Vihear, an ancient Hindu temple located between Cambodia and Thailand, helped strengthen Hun Sen's political hold over the country because of its utility as a nationalistic symbol. Preah Vihear and the 4.6 square kilometre plot of land adjacent to it was highly contested as both countries claimed sovereignty over them. On the surface, the Thai perspective dominated the news reporting in 2011 (*Bangkok Post* 2011a; Sokha 2011; *The Economist* 2011). Likewise, many works about Preah Vihear highlighted Thailand's aggressive border policy and domestic politics. Thai nationalists, particularly the Yellow-shirts, used the temple as a means of stirring up domestic support for their interests and exacerbating tensions (Pavin 2010: 89; Singh 1962; Strate 2009; Kitti 2010; *Bangkok Post* 2011d; Charnvit, Pou, and Pavin 2013: 25–28; Kheang 2012: 207). Some media outlets (mostly from Cambodian and non-Thai sources) and academics portrayed Thailand as the antagonist and Cambodia as a victim. While Thailand may be largely responsible for instigating the conflicts, Hun Sen's part in the dispute offers another significant perspective. As Thais stirred public attention over Preah Vihear, the Cambodian government used the conflict to win hearts and minds at home. Hun Sen co-opted the temple into his nationalist political platform to build his domestic image and help the Cambodia People's Party (CPP) win elections. In this paper, I argue that although Thailand tried to discredit Cambodia's claim to the temple, Preah Vihear was one of many political weapons that Hun Sen used in his goals of building personal prestige and national pride.

Within the regional context, the Preah Vihear dispute is one of many examples of territorial issues in East and Southeast Asia. The issue that has received the greatest media attention has been China's claims in the South China Sea, specifically the Paracel and Spratly islands. The Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia have all contested Beijing's assertions. The situation in the South China Sea has significance not only for the region, but also for international relations, as the United States has tried to support its Southeast Asian allies in protesting Beijing's claims. There are also the Senkaku and Kuril Islands, the sovereignty of which Japan has argued with China and Russia, respectively.

On the Southeast Asian mainland, there is an ongoing disagreement between Cambodia and Vietnam regarding the demarcation of the border near the Mekong region. Cambodian opposition leader Sam Rainsy used the territorial contest to criticize Hun Sen, but with mediocre results. In addition, Hun Sen has made development deals with Hanoi to draw attention away from issues highlighted by the opposition. Although

it is often overshadowed by China's incursions into the South China Sea, the boundary issue between Cambodia and Thailand has implications for regional stability. Hun Sen has been one obstacle to peace and unity among partners of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Over the last decade, the prime minister has developed close relations with the Chinese, both militarily and economically. Cambodia blocked a United Nations ruling and ASEAN statement condemning China's policies in the South China Sea (Willemyns 2016). Many Cambodians have also lost land to foreign developers, including Chinese developers (Verasna 2016). Cambodia's border conflict with Thailand has only helped to strengthen Hun Sen's political power and made him obstinate to policies benefitting the region.

Few studies have primarily examined the Cambodia perspective of the Preah Vihear conflict. Kimly Ngoun, Sok Udom Deth (Deth 2014b), and Martin Wagener are a few who have looked at the temple's influence on Cambodian politics. In particular, Wagener wrote about the territorial clash from the years 2008 to 2011 in his essay entitled, "Lessons from Preah Vihear: Thailand, Cambodia, and the Nature of Low-Intensity Border Conflicts" (Wagener 2011). He argued that the goals of leaders in low-intensity border conflicts are different from those in high-intensity ones. For example, during the dispute Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and Hun Sen both walked a fine line between keeping tensions short of an all-out war, but high enough to be able to incite nationalism and political support at home. Thus, neither prime minister wanted "resolution nor an escalation of the border dispute" for domestic reasons (Wagener 2011: 30). Within this framework, Wagener went on to explicate how both Abhisit and Hun Sen employed the temple in their politics. Wagener saw Hun Sen as the main instigator of the border conflicts by arguing that Preah Vihear was instrumental in many of his day-to-day domestic politics (Wagener 2011: 39). The Cambodian prime minister used the territorial situation to draw attention away from the country's political problems. Hun Sen found ways to build his image by criticising Thais for their aggressive actions to promote Cambodian nationalism. In addition, Preah Vihear enabled Hun Sen to build up the political and military influence of his son Hun Manet. Wagener then illustrated the motivations of Abhisit by citing pressures from ultra-nationalists and upcoming elections. By the end of 2011, Wagener argued there was little conclusion to the border dispute, even with the election of a new Thai Prime Minister, Yingluck Shinawatra.

Instead of looking at both parties like Wagener, this essay will concentrate on the Cambodian perspective, specifically Hun Sen's role in the

dispute and the use of Preah Vihear in nationalist rhetoric for his benefit from 2008 to 2013. Wagener argued, “Even though Hun Sen acted as the agitator in the dispute over Preah Vihear, this does not exculpate Thailand” (Wagener 2011: 43–44). While Hun Sen surely shares some of the blame, other scholars placed most of the responsibility on the Thai Yellow-shirts and the government. Thai scholar Pavin Chachavalpongpun stated that Thai nationalists in 2008 stirred nationalistic fervour over Preah Vihear and exacerbated relations with Cambodia to win political support (Pavin 2010: 83–84; 2012: 90–91, 95; Chheang 2013; Puangthong 2013: xi). Charnvit Kasetsiri viewed the Thai media and the country’s historical discourse as some of the main causes of Thailand’s aggression (Charnvit, Pou, and Pavin 2013: 15). Kimly Ngoun saw both countries’ “divergent constructions of history” that “has tried to promote a sense of national identity based on the concepts of defined territorial sovereignty [...]” as the cause of tension (Kimly 2012b). In this paper, unlike Wagener and Kimly, I will examine the role of Hun Sen, as he used the provocations of the Thai ultra-nationalists, Yellow-shirts, the Abhisit Vejjajiva government, and members of the military leadership to promote nationalism at home. In addition to disputing Cambodia’s sovereignty over the temple, the Thai nationalists provided more opportunities for Hun Sen to build his domestic political image. The conflict with Thailand allowed the Cambodian prime minister to develop nationalist rhetoric around Preah Vihear; it became a fight for national prestige and territory.

Hun Sen’s use of Preah Vihear and the conflict with Thailand can be seen as an example of political leaders attempting to promote nationalism. Benedict Anderson’s work on this idea discusses the role of elites and states in creating languages, images, symbols and memorials to encourage and solidify a political message, ethnic group, or ruling hierarchy (Anderson 1991). In the case of Preah Vihear, Hun Sen and the CPP made the temple a representation of Cambodian national pride. Anderson viewed museums including Preah Vihear in this category as “profoundly political” (Anderson 1991: 178–179). As will be shown, Cambodian leaders linked the temple to what it meant to be a Cambodian, much like Angkor Wat, which appears on the national flag. They created a Cambodian self-consciousness that encompassed Preah Vihear, whereas it held little significance to Phnom Penh and even Bangkok until the 1960s. In addition, Thailand became a community of the “other”, in contrast to the Cambodian people. The northern neighbour was an easy target for Hun Sen to vilify, even though not all Thais agreed with the policies advocated by ultra-nationalists and the Yellow-shirts. More re-

search by Kimly complicates the idea of nationalism; he pointed out that some Cambodians, mostly along the border, held “less nationalistic sentiments against Thailand” (Quoted by Sok 2014). Some Cambodians did not buy into the political rhetoric coming from Phnom Penh. Notwithstanding some of the differences in feelings towards Thailand, Hun Sen and the CPP employed the temple and territorial dispute in nationalistic terms that a portion of Cambodians seemed to understand.

From 2003 to 2013, Cambodia’s temple history and later Preah Vihear played a role in Hun Sen’s politics. By the early 2000s, the CPP had firm control over the government but it was not immune from criticism from opposition leaders like Sam Rainsy. As Kimly stated, “The Preah Vihear border conflict with Thailand thus presented a perfect opportunity for Hun Sen and his government” to deflect some of the political attacks and “construct themselves as nationalists” (Kimly 2016: 219). Relations between Cambodia and Thailand grew tense and even hostile between 2008 and 2013. Each time Thai nationalists fuelled public outrage over Preah Vihear and incited armed conflict, Hun Sen and the CPP turned the situations to their political gain. Conflict with Thailand provided Hun Sen with opportunities to portray himself as a patriot, a peacemaker and strong leader, and he equated the Thai military threats on Preah Vihear as attacks to Cambodian territory and the national esteem. The CPP highlighted the events at the border to overshadow domestic problems. Some Cambodians profited economically from Hun Sen’s management of Preah Vihear as development at the border increased. Hun Sen and the CPP would capitalise domestically from the territorial conflict and employ it in their political rhetoric.

This article covers major events including the 2003 Thai embassy burning and the temple dispute between 2008 and 2013. I begin with the 2003 incident at the Thai embassy in Phnom Penh when Cambodia’s temple history became an issue in the domestic and foreign political dialogue between the two nations. Although Preah Vihear was not involved, Cambodia’s temple heritage became a point of contention. Then, in 2008, conflict over Preah Vihear erupted. It began before the 2008 election in Cambodia and after Hun Sen submitted Preah Vihear as a United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site. Thai nationalists reacted to this move by provoking an armed clash. Another border skirmish broke out in 2011, as both Cambodia and Thailand were preparing for elections again. After this, I discuss how Preah Vihear continued to affect Hun Sen’s politics in 2013 during the International Court of Justice (ICJ) hearing.

## Historical Background

This Cambodian-Thai territorial issue was part of a long rivalry between the two peoples. For centuries, the Khmer and Siamese kingdoms warred for control over the region. The ancient Khmers built Preah Vihear in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries on a cliff top of the Dangrek mountain range that divides modern-day Cambodia and Thailand. In contrast to the famous Angkor Wat, which spans 203 acres, Preah Vihear measures only 800 square meters. During the numerous wars between the Khmers and the Siamese, the temple remained in obscurity. In 1863, the French colonised Cambodia and annexed three provinces from Siam. In 1904, French cartographers established the boundary between the French colony of Cambodia and Thailand, placing Preah Vihear in Indochina. It became clear that the temple was not in Thai territory when colonial officials flew the French flag over the plot during a visit by Thai Prince Damrong. During the Second World War, Thailand annexed the former provinces they had lost and Bangkok subsequently relinquished the territories back to Cambodia, although Thai troops remained stationed around Preah Vihear. The border area at the temple did not become an issue until the late 1950s when Cambodian Prince Norodom Sihanouk called for the Thais to remove their troops and hand over ownership (Strate 2009: 208). When Thailand refused, Sihanouk cut relations with Bangkok and took his plea to the ICJ, which in 1962 ruled 9-3 that the temple was in Cambodian territory. However, the court made no decision about the 4.6 km of land adjacent to it. The Preah Vihear issue faded from public awareness with the Vietnam War and Khmer Rouge era. While there were continued disputes over the border demarcation, the temple did not play a role in causing major tensions again until the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Born in 1952, Hun Sen spent his childhood in rural Cambodia. At the age of 18, he dropped out of school to join the Khmer Rouge (Strangio 2014: 23). In 1978, he defected and fled to Vietnam for sanctuary. Hun Sen returned to Cambodia with the Vietnamese in 1979 when they overthrew the Khmer Rouge. He then became the foreign minister in the new government set up by Hanoi. He would later help establish the CPP in preparation for nationwide elections. In 1992–1993, the United Nations (UN) occupied the country and a year later, Hun Sen and the CPP, won the second – largest number of electoral seats. Fearing the loss of political power, Hun Sen forced the first – placed party to form a coalition government with the CPP. Shortly thereafter, the CPP began marginalising its rivals through intimidation and the killing of nearly 100 opposition party members during the UN occupation (Adams



2012). Then, in 1997, the party launched a coup and Hun Sen became the sole leader of Cambodia, ruling with little opposition. Nevertheless, the government had to show its legitimacy, particularly during election season. One way in which it did this was through using Thailand's nationalistic frenzy over Preah Vihear and crafting a version of Cambodian nationalism that included the temple as a political weapon.

## An Example of Khmer Temple Heritage Inciting Nationalism

Relations between the ancient Khmers and Siamese, and later between the modern-day Cambodians and Thais, had never been smooth, but they reached a significant low point in the early 2000s. In 2003, the Thai embassy was an epicentre for anti-Thai protests as Cambodia was preparing for elections. During this time, rumours began that Thai actress Suvanan Kongying wanted Cambodia to return Angkor Wat to Thailand and that “she would rather be a dog than be a Khmer national” (Hinton 2006: 445–446). These reports were not verified and any counter-evidence was ignored. Authorities later claimed that the accusations were false, but it was too late (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 2003). Several hundred protestors and students gathered in front of the Thai embassy on 29 January shouting anti-Thai slogans. The Thai ambassador called upon Cambodia's security forces for help but received none. The situation escalated when another rumour circulated that the Cambodian Embassy in Bangkok was on fire. The protestors reacted by burning Thai flags, throwing rocks at the building, and eventually setting it ablaze. At the end of the day, the 5 million dollar Thai embassy building was in ashes.

The violence and negative sentiment continued. Cambodian protestors looted Thai hotels and businesses in Phnom Penh and attacked several Thai people (Hinton 2006: 449). Geoffrey Cain described the power of Cambodia's anti-Thai sentiments in an article entitled “Cambodian Nationalism Unleashed.” For example, the rumours about Suvanan's slander of Cambodian nationalism were powerful enough to incite public protest. Cain quoted Roderick Brazier, the Cambodian country representative for the Asia Foundation, saying, “When Cambodians feel they're losing their culture, they get angry” (Cain 2008). The burning of the Thai embassy was evidence of how quickly tensions could escalate from a rumour.

Hinton examined several online posts and concluded that the 2003 riots were a political manoeuvre to gain support before the election. He argued that the focus on Khmer temples was “a major selling point in

the July 2003 elections” (Hinton 2006: 450). The CPP won 47 per cent of the votes, while the Sam Rainsy Party received 21 per cent. In parliament, the CPP garnered 73 out of 123 seats. The nationalistic fervour generated from the incident strengthened the prime minister’s image.

## Preah Vihear’s Return

Discussions between the two countries regarding Preah Vihear were cordial from 2002 to 2007, with meetings about whether Thailand would agree to Cambodia’s nomination of the temple as a World Heritage Site or if it would be a joint effort. Negotiations took a turn for the worse in late 2007-early 2008 when Hun Sen and Sok Anh refused a combined Cambodian-Thai inscription. Relations grew hostile. However, Hun Sen had every right to make the decision to revoke a combined inscription. Volker Grabowsky, referencing Puangthong R. Pawakapan, explained that the Cambodian leaders made the change because the temple belonged to Cambodia (Grabowsky 2014). Former Thai Prime Ministers Chuan Leekpai and Thaksin Shinawatra agreed with this sentiment. In 2008, Hun Sen requested that Preah Vihear be inducted as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the request was approved in the spring of 2008. Afterwards, the Cambodian government built a billboard at the temple site that read, “I am proud to be born Khmer” (Kimly 2016: 217). Thailand’s Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej and Foreign Minister Noppadon Pattama gave their approval of Cambodia’s ownership over the temple and its UNESCO nomination. The Thai public, especially ardent nationalists, were not happy; Samak and Noppadon were labelled as traitors and conspirators with Thaksin (Pavin 2010: 84; Puangthong 2013: 62–63; Charnvit, Pou, and Pavin 2013: 25; Grabowsky 2017: 405). Leading the criticism was the Thai Yellow-shirt People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) party, which included such notable figures as Abhisit, Major General Chamlong Srimung and Sondhi Limthongkul. Hoping to bolster their support at home, the group accused the current Thai government of collusion with Hun Sen.

Pavin argued that the UNESCO decision to give Preah Vihear World Heritage status should not have exacerbated relations, but it did. Thai nationalists forced Samak to resign in September 2008, eventually bringing in their own ally, Abhisit Vejjajiva, to the top job in December. Between these two events, a skirmish had broken out in October when both countries sent troops to the border. When he became prime minister, Abhisit felt pressure from the Thai public to do something about Preah Vihear (*Kampuchea Thmey* 2008). A CPP spokesman Khieu Kan-

harith said that if Thailand decided to invade, Cambodian troops “have been prepared” and the Thais must “be ready to consider which side will suffer the most heaviest casualties” (Makara 2008).

Before the fighting in October, Hun Sen threatened the Thai government to remove its troops from Cambodia or he would use force. When warnings were not heeded, the Cambodian government deployed 800 soldiers to the border (BBC 2008). At the same time, the Cambodian army increased recruitment and began forming militias from former Khmer Rouge members (Hunt 2008). The Cambodian military elite “launched a conscription campaign” and lobbied for more of the 2009 national budget (Hughes 2009: 212, 2010: 96). Wagener said that without the border dispute, it was doubtful that Hun Sen could have pushed the military budget request forward. He increased the defence budget by 60 per cent, to USD 274 million, to meet the Thai threat (Wagener 2011: 40). Another CPP spokesperson, Phay Siphon, supported the military build-up by portraying Cambodians as victims. Phay said, “We [Cambodians] are peaceful people,” and “Thailand is worsening these problems [the border conflict]” (Cain 2008).

During an event at Ta Moan in February 2010, Hun Sen criticised the Thai troops at Preah Vihear. The prime minister accused Thailand of invading Cambodia and said the country had “cheated on history by changing the name of Preah Vihear temple to Phra Viharn” (“Quotes from Hun Sen’s Speech at Ta Moan Area” 2010). He then invoked a Buddhist curse by declaring, “If you [Abhisit] don’t tell the truth about Siam [Thai] troops’ invasion in Cambodia on 15 July [2008], let the magic objects break your neck, may you be shot [...]” The “magic objects” refer to Buddhist talismans. Hun Sen claimed that Thailand would incur bad karma for their invasion and compromise the country’s religious commitment.

Preah Vihear and the border conflict had become a tool capable of winning the hearts and minds of some Cambodians. Hun Sen’s power has rested on corruption, violence, and propaganda. Cambodians often supported the party out of fear or because they were beneficiaries. However, Preah Vihear became a symbol that attracted public support for Hun Sen. *The Wall Street Journal* said that “CPP rule rests on genuine popularity” and “nationalism in defense of Cambodia’s territorial sovereignty vis-à-vis Thailand” (Thayer 2009b). The combination of an anti-Thai mentality and territorial sensitivities were potent ideas that successfully stirred Cambodian nationalist emotions.

Some Cambodians began re-adopting Preah Vihear into their nationalistic rhetoric. During the 1960s, Cambodia leaders in Phnom Penh

had stoked the fires of nationalism by calling all Cambodians to defend the temple from Thailand's aggression (Charnvit, Pou, and Pavin 2013: 7–8). Decades later, in June of 2008, the Khmer Civilisation Support Association (KCSA) sponsored an event celebrating the anniversary of the 1962 ICJ ruling. The KCSA said that the ceremony was “being held in gratitude to our Cambodian ancestors who built Preah Vihear [...] and] also dedicated to former King Sihanouk” (Eath 2008). Interestingly, for centuries before the 1950s, the temple had played little significance in Khmer and Siamese religious traditions and politics. Grabowsky stated that the local Kui people felt more connection to Preah Vihear than the majority Cambodian and Thais (Grabowsky 2017: 411). However, Cambodian leaders and some grassroots groups now laid claim to a heritage that they had previously cared little about but was now part of the Khmer imagined community. In addition, the KCSA praised the Cambodian government for maintaining the sovereignty and integrity of the temple. Preah Vihear was becoming a source of national pride.

Near the time of the KCSA event, the CPP commemorated Preah Vihear's UNESCO induction with a free concert at Phnom Penh's Olympic stadium where it reiterated its many accomplishments (Strangio 2011). The temple provided tangible proof of the regime's power and patriotism. Government officials and supporters posted billboards and created souvenirs featuring a photo of Preah Vihear, Hun Sen, and a Cambodian flag. Spectacles, images, symbols, and rhetoric depicted Hun Sen as the great defender of Cambodia's prestige.

Some Cambodians expressed their views about Preah Vihear and their nationalism through the internet – particularly social media sites, reader responses to articles, and blogs. Two sites in particular discussed Preah Vihear, with the first being *Ki-Media*. According to its website, *Ki-Media* was “dedicated to publishing sensitive information about Cambodia” (Eath 2008). The site's political biases were obvious on its homepage: the left-hand column had pictures of Hun Sen's opposition (such as Sam Rainsy), while the right-hand column contained images of “traitors”, which included the prime minister. However, even with its partisan stance, attacks on Hun Sen did not dominate the comments posted about Preah Vihear. Some Cambodians wrote in support of Hun Sen's policies regarding the temple. In June of 2008, *Ki-Media* posted an article about the celebration of the anniversary of the 1962 ICJ decision (Eath 2008). The article praised Cambodian leaders for defending the temple from Thailand. One anonymous person commented: “As we all know that nothing you [Hun Sen] do can stop people from talking bad or good” (Eath 2008). The post ended with, “GOD BLESS you [Hun Sen] in

protecting our nation.” Even though many of the comments seemed outlandish and rooted in falsehoods, they were still evident of the power that Preah Vihear had over some Cambodians.

The second was *preahvibear.com*, a site devoted to promoting and defending the temple. Although the website has not been updated since December 2010, its contents still provide valuable public viewpoints on Preah Vihear and Hun Sen. In October 2008, the administrator of the site posted pictures from *Reuters* showing Thai soldiers who were captured in the Preah Vihear province during the brief conflict. The responses included 46 comments from almost a dozen bloggers. A commenter with the username “Anti-Thai” said, “I say hang them! Those bastards raped and killed our people” (*preahvibear.com* 2013). Another writer called “Thais “[...] a race of homeless thieves [...]” (*preahvibear.com* 2013), and another said, “Thais got rich from stealing from their nicer neighbors” (*preahvibear.com* 2013). However, the conversation was also interspersed with comments criticising Hun Sen.

Although internet social media sites have become places to find Cambodian sentiments about political issues, they are still not without flaws. Part of the motivation for using web sources came from Alexander Hinton’s article, “Khmerness and the Thai ‘Other’” about the 2003 riots. After discussing the cautions of using the internet, Hinton saw some benefits of doing so, such as finding comments posted in “real-time” and gaining insight into a certain section of the Cambodian population, specifically technology users (Hinton 2006: 448). One problem with using blogs and posted comments as sources is the difficulty in authentication. A writer could pose as several different people. It can be difficult to perform data cleaning and weed out fake accounts. It is also challenging to determine how these websites are representative of Cambodians generally. Nevertheless, to ignore websites, blogs and other social sites would be to marginalise a fast-growing and modern form of communication. The internet can also be helpful in observing how some Cambodians felt about Preah Vihear and Hun Sen. Web sources could be considered a form of print – capitalism or viral – capitalism (Anderson 1991: 24–25, and 33). Some of the sentiments expressed online had similar tones and rhetoric to that which the government propagated. Most importantly, the internet has become a space in which some Cambodians are able to show their nationalist pride and connect with many others whom they have never met but feel some sort of connection with.

The downside of the nationalistic fervour created by Preah Vihear was that it tended to dominate public political discourse and distract Cambodians from important issues. The appeal of Cambodian pride, its

temple history and hatred of Thailand have drawn some attention away from the real problems afflicting the nation (Hinton 2006: 453; Wagener 2011: 39–41; Windsor 2008). Sam Rainsy argued that “The simmering conflict with Thailand helped mask more pressing domestic issues, such as persistent rights abuses and corruption [...]” (Strangio 2011). The problems of land evictions and lack of jobs were briefly overlooked (Wagener 2011: 41). Cain said that

CPP campaigners quickly transformed their platforms from issues such as corruption and inflation to a single one that appeared black and white: Hun Sen and his close allies were strong but peaceful leaders, solely responsible for uniting Cambodians against Thai aggression [over Preah Vihear] (Cain 2008).

Some soldiers who had been stationed to protect the border felt the government neglected them by providing insufficient supplies (Kimly 2016: 228). Locals complained about overcrowding and over-industrialisation. More importantly, the drumming up of nationalist sentiment had reduced the opportunities for public discourse regarding possible solutions to the border dispute with Thailand. Grabowsky interviewed Pou Sothirak and he said “such a debate has never been initiated in Cambodia” about how to resolve the issue (Grabowsky 2017: 434–435). The voices of uncontrolled nationalism drowned out problems pressing the country.

Despite the diversion, Preah Vihear’s induction as a World Heritage site reaped some economic benefits for the regime. When Hun Sen made the submission to have the site listed, the Thai newspaper *The Nation*, reported that if Preah Vihear were accepted, it would help Hun Sen’s development objectives for the country (Supalak 2008). Carlyle Thayer supported Supalak’s article by arguing that Preah Vihear would boost the country’s tourist industry (Thayer 2009a: 91). In 2006, 712,515 people visited the temple (Office of Archaeology 2008: 30). One year after the fighting ceased in 2012, the number of visitors increased by 147 per cent (Reuy 2012). Several years later, tourism was up 53 per cent, according to Preah Vihear’s provincial tourism department (Royal Embassy of Cambodia in Jakarta, Indonesia 2014). Tourism aided the local economy in several ways, ranging from souvenirs and gifts shops to transportation and hotel accommodation. In addition, a beer company called the Khmer Brewery released a new product called “Cambodia Beer” with an image of Preah Vihear as the logo (Deth 2014a: 15; Weinland 2012). In one of Kimly’s interviews, an interviewee thanked “Thailand for causing the conflict. Otherwise my province would be left isolated like a frog in the well” (Kimly 2016: 221). The border area saw an increase in residential settlements under the governmental guise of populating the province

for national defence purposes. Some villagers looked to Hun Sen with much appreciation for their new property.

Coincidentally, the UNESCO listing and the border conflict with Thailand all took place within the same year as the elections. The Cambodian Information Centre, a non-partisan news website, posted an article from the *Associated Press* (AP) citing Preah Vihear as central to Hun Sen's campaign. AP reported, "[...] patriotic passions over Preah Vihear Temple and Hun Sen's firm stance against Thailand have swayed many undecided voters in his favor [...]" (Munthit 2008). Caroline Hughes also cited that the dispute with Thailand played a part in the CPP's victory (Hughes 2010: 89). Many Cambodians came together because of Preah Vihear. Opposition leader Kem Sokha tried to follow Hun Sen's example by attempting to use the temple as part of his political message, but made minimal gains (Deth 2014a: 15).

The CPP won 90 of 123 seats (58 per cent of the votes) in the 2008 election. Approximately 3.5 million people checked Hun Sen on the ballot, while Sam Rainsy collected a meagre 26 seats in parliament, as 1.3 million Cambodians sided with the opposition. According to Thayer, Preah Vihear and Hun Sen's fervent defence of Cambodian territory was a "vote getter" (Thayer 2009b). During the election, Sam Rainsy tried to derail the CPP campaign and its use of the temple by calling attention to the Vietnamese border dispute. He claimed that Vietnam had stolen land from Cambodia and implored people not to let the government's manipulation of Preah Vihear distract them from Vietnam's aggression. Unfortunately, Sam Rainsy's pleas caused little domestic upheaval because of Preah Vihear's dominance in the media (Kheang 2012: 207). In addition, Hun Sen struck a deal with Hanoi to bring in economic development projects to the area (Hughes 2010: 98). The CPP effectively silenced Sam Rainsy, which meant that the boundary problem with Vietnam was side-lined in favour of Preah Vihear.

Several months later, in April 2009, fighting broke out again. In March, 100 Thai troops entered the contested area near Preah Vihear. Hun Sen warned the Thais to leave. On April 3, the two sides fired on one another, leaving several casualties. Some Thais and Cambodians tried to diffuse the situation but had little success. Cambodian officials demanded that the Thai government pay for damages to the families who had lost loved ones. However, Abhisit did not back down and continued to oppose Preah Vihear's UNESCO induction (Puangthong 2013: 70–71). Pavin explained the Thai prime minister's motives in this situation by citing Abhisit's efforts to build public support after low approval ratings (Pavin 2010: 107). When PAD members went to the border to



protest Preah Vihear's World Heritage status, fighting took place with local Thai villagers, who supported Thaksin. At this time, Hun Sen and Thaksin had developed a strong relationship by inviting the former Thai prime minister to Cambodia to advise on important issues. The Thai government then declared that the country was under attack by enemies from the south. Abhisit's approval rating soon rose above 50 per cent because of his stance against Cambodia (Pavin 2010: 110–111; Puangthong 2013: 72). Hun Sen responded by vilifying the Thai government. The *Bangkok Post* quoted Hun Sen as saying, "I am not the enemy of the Thai people. But the [Thai] Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister look down on Cambodia extremely" (*Bangkok Post* 2010). He added: "Cambodia will have no happiness as long as this group [PAD] is in power." Both sides of the border were digging in their heels; neither leader wanted to lose face as doing so could have led to a dip in political support at home.

## Round Two

Tensions re-escalated when Thai nationalists instigated another round of disputes. In the summer of 2010, an offshoot of the PAD group, the Thai Patriots Network, held demonstrations urging the government to force Cambodia to leave the disputed territory. Then, in December 2010, several Thai nationals crossed into disputed territory along the Thai-Cambodian border (Charnvit, Pou, and Pavin 2013: 34–35; Suy 2010). Cambodian authorities arrested them for illegal entry and espionage. On 9 January 2011, 30,000 Thai Red-shirts held an anti-government protest in Bangkok, creating concern for Abhisit and the Yellow-shirts, who feared a Red-shirt victory in the upcoming election. The Red-shirts had dominated the last two elections and their popularity was growing. Thai conservatives saw a Red-shirt take-over as a threat to their monopoly over politics. In order to ensure a victory in the next elections, the Yellow-shirts incited another dispute over Preah Vihear with Cambodia. The December arrests of a high-profile PAD leader, Veera Somkwamkit, reignited anti-Cambodian sentiments.

On 13 January, Yellow-shirts demonstrated in Bangkok, forcing the Abhisit government to argue for the freedom of the two Thais in Cambodia and to hold on to the disputed territory around Preah Vihear (*Bangkok Post* 2011e; *Bangkok Post* 2011d; *Prachatai* 2011). However, Cambodian security officials did not release PAD Veera (he would not be released until summer of 2014). Following criticism that he was too soft on Cambodia and receiving pressure from the military, Abhisit



agreed to use more force. Thai troops entered the territory around Preah Vihear as part of “military exercises” (*Bangkok Post* 2011a). Cambodia perceived the move as a threat to its sovereignty and conflict broke out on 4 February. Hun Sen declared that Cambodia would only back down when Thailand gave up its aggressive policies (*Bangkok Post* 2011a). Several months later, in May, fighting took place at the border at two other old temple sites 150 kilometres west of Preah Vihear (Charnvit, Pou, and Pavin 2013: 36).

At the same time as issuing strong rhetoric in response to Thailand’s provocations, Hun Sen attempted to maintain a peaceful posture. Several days after the fighting, at a university graduation, he said, “We need the United Nations [...] to guarantee that there is no more fighting.” Hun Sen went on to declare, “We will go to the UN Security Council whether you [Thailand] like it or not” (*BBC* 2011). The UN urged both countries to engage in a ceasefire agreement (*Bangkok Post* 2011b). Simultaneously, the Cambodian government began drafting an appeal to the ICJ to reiterate the 1962 verdict. A week later, Hun Sen proposed that ASEAN help with peace talks. Cambodia wanted ASEAN to deploy a peace-keeping force to guard the Preah Vihear territory during the negotiation process. Abhisit agreed to Indonesian monitors but the Thai military would not go along with it. Abhisit vetoed the plan under the rationale that it was too soon to talk about a ceasefire (*Bangkok Post* 2011b). He was also feeling pressure from members of the military not to acquiesce. Abhisit may have avoided peace talks to use the issue to build public support at home before the election. He justified his decision by saying, “We were not the ones that started the fight. We did what other countries would – that is, when we are fired at or attacked first, we fight back” (*Bangkok Post* 2011c). Thailand’s intransigence was the obstacle to peace. However, to be fair, with elections in the summer of 2011, Abhisit needed to be seen standing strong in defence of Thai territory.

Hun Sen’s efforts to broker a cessation in hostilities made himself look like a peacemaker in contrast to Thai ultra-nationalists. He accused Thailand of “repeated acts of aggression” while appealing to the UN for intervention (*Aljazeera* 2011). Later, at the Chaktomuk Theater in Phnom Penh, Hun Sen declared, “Thailand is making this war, not Cambodia, and Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vajjajiva must take responsibility for these war crimes” (Sokha and Sokheng 2011). Hun Sen cited two pieces of evidence to indict Abhisit: the shelling of the Preah Vihear temple and the use of a cluster bomb. A frustrated Hun Sen appealed to the audience at Chaktomuk Theater by asking, “Is that a clash? This is a real war; it exchanged heavy artillery.” The claim that Abhisit committed war

crimes succeeded in vilifying the Thai government. The internationalisation of the dispute drew attention to Cambodia's victimisation. The conflict seemed black and white: Cambodia wanted peace while Thailand had territorial ambitions. Then, in April, the two forces clashed again. Finally, the ICJ intervened to halt the fighting and scheduled a hearing for the spring of 2013 to hear both countries' claims.

Meanwhile, far from the front lines of Preah Vihear, the *Asian Times* cited that the temple incident provided an opportunity for Hun Sen to build his son's political experience. In 2008, the prime minister began to prepare "[his son, Hun Manet] as a powerful military ally and possible prime ministerial successor" (Strangio 2011). Three years later Hun Manet was involved in the military ceasefire in 2011 and a series of secret negotiations. He led the Cambodian delegation in a "closed-door meeting" between both Thai and Cambodian military commanders (Cheang 2011a). Hun Sen seemed to be manoeuvring his son into important roles and effectively grooming him for future responsibilities.

The 2012 election was another win for the CPP. Before the election, the *Diplomat* observed that Hun Sen's party was primed to win. The prime minister was full of confidence as he just finished a "diplomatic" brawl with Thailand. A reporter named Luke Hunt argued that Preah Vihear offered "a fantastic issue [that] he [Hun Sen] used to whip up nationalist sentiment and political support at home" (Hunt 2012). However, Hunt went on to write that Preah Vihear was not as prominent in the political rhetoric of 2012 as it had been in the past. The CPP dominated the senate elections, winning 45 of 57 seats. Six months later, in the commune elections the CPP unsurprisingly cruised to victory, winning 7,703 seats to the second-placed party's 2,211.

Contrary to Hunt, Kimly wrote in an article for *New Mandala* (a website sponsored by the Australian National University that provides analysis on Southeast Asian issues) showing that the temple was still a useful political symbol. After the latest border clash in 2011, Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and Hun Sen agreed to withdraw troops from the demilitarised zone and replace them with police forces. Kimly was on-site for what he called "a grand ceremony" to withdraw Cambodian troops from Preah Vihear in the summer of 2012 (Kimly 2012b). There was a strange amount of fan-fare for a military withdrawal, as the CPP turned the occasion into a public relations event. Hundreds of ASEAN and UNESCO flags flew alongside the Cambodian banner. Crowds of people gathered and lined the streets donning tee-shirts with peaceful messages. The scheduling of the withdrawal was symbolic because it was around the same time the government was celebrating the

50th anniversary of the ICJ's original awarding of Preah Vihear to Cambodia in 1962 (*Global Times* 2012).

The administrator of the *Khmerization* blog recorded some sentiments of its readers regarding the border dispute in 2012. The site asked its readers what advice they would give to the Cambodian government if they were an adviser for one day. One of the themes was the Preah Vihear issue. One writer wanted the CPP to not give an inch to the Thais when it came to negotiations or settlements over the border (*KhmerAngkor* 2012). Instead, Hun Sen needed to rely on the ICJ. In summation, Thailand could not be trusted and only a third party would ensure a fair treatment of the dispute.

## 2013

The ICJ began hearing both Cambodian and Thai lawyers plead their cases in April 2013. On 11 April 2013, Hun Sen spoke at Kampong Popil temple and urged Cambodians “to exercise restraint and remain calm while waiting” for the ICJ decision (*Agency Kampuchea Press* 2013; Yun and Chea 2013). He was optimistic about the ICJ and felt confident in Cambodia's claim to Preah Vihear. The government did not need to inundate the ICJ with evidence proving Cambodia's case. The country's claims to the territory were already stronger than Thailand's. In addition, leaving Preah Vihear in the hands of the ICJ supported Hun Sen's image as a good member of the international community.

However, the Cambodian government did use the ICJ hearing as an opportunity to take rhetorical shots at Thailand. Though delighted that an international arbiter was handling the Preah Vihear issue, Hun Sen did not trust the Thai military. On 25 February 2013, he warned that Thailand might again use force if the ICJ decided in favour of Cambodia (Ponniah 2013). He continued by saying, “the Thais will use armed forces, but Cambodia will not use armed forces” (*The Cambodia Herald/Asia News Network* 2013; Meyn 2013). If the Thai military and nationalist groups saw the loss of territory as an affront to the nation's sovereignty, conflict could erupt. Considering this possibility, Hun Sen had reason to be afraid, as the Thai military had already used its armed forces.

The *Bangkok Post* commented that Hun Sen would capitalise politically on the ICJ case. If a decision went in favour of Cambodia the “nationalist sentiment would have already been well used” to “the CPP's benefit ahead of the election” (*Bangkok Post* 2013). If Cambodia lost, the reporter said, “[...] it was a political gamble where the gain-loss ratio was deemed worth the risk.” *The Diplomat* showed some Cambodians in a

small town near Preah Vihear, drinking and chanting “Preah Vihear!” and “Kampuchea!” at a gathering (Ponniah 2013); one police officer was wearing a hat with “ICJ 1962” embroidered on it. In the comments section of an article from June of 2012 about the upcoming ICJ case in April of 2013, one person wrote, “Thailand and Laos [...] should honor the great Khmer civilisation and influences” and “give thanks [...] for giving birth to these two ungrateful countries” (*Ki-media* 2012).

The Cambodian government held several public relations events to continue promoting Preah Vihear and nationalism. In June, the CPP had two state and religious ceremonies near the temple. A CPP delegation led by the Governor of Phnom Penh visited soldiers and their families stationed in the province. Governor PA Socheatevong announced that his trip was on behalf of Hun Sen, and that donations were given in hopes to “tighten the relationship between Phnom Penh Capital Hall and the” army guarding Preah Vihear (Phnom Penh Capital Hall 2013). On the same day, the governor held a religious ceremony, with several Buddhist monks officiating to wish “happiness and peace” at the temple. Again, the delegates brought more donations for the soldiers and the local people. In July, the CPP hosted a celebration for the anniversary of Preah Vihear’s World Heritage status. Approximately 10,000 Cambodians gathered at the Olympic stadium in Phnom Penh for performances in tribute to the country’s temple history. Hosted by Deputy Prime Minister and Cabinet Minister Sok An, the purpose of the gathering was to “promote awareness of the temple to Cambodia’s younger generations and to show the country’s pride that the temple gained world heritage status” (*Xinhua* 2013).

Meanwhile, before the parliamentary elections of 2013, Hun Sen’s sons became increasingly politically active. The clashes in 2008 and 2011 over Preah Vihear had given Hun Manet the opportunity to build a modicum of political experience. In February of 2013, the CPP announced that Hun Manet and his youngest brother would run for parliamentary elections in July. Hun Manet became “increasingly involved in public events – attending ASEAN summits, inaugurating buildings, and distributing donations on his father’s behalf” (Sokchea 2013; *Fox News World* 2013) to build his own public image. The youngest son, Hun Manet – a colonel and deputy chief of the Defence Ministry’s intelligence department – was working on building a youth nationalist movement called, “Youth in the Cause of the Motherland” (Sokheng 2012; *Fox News World* 2013). Hun Manet’s involvement with the youth organisation helped promote and perpetuate state ideas to the future generation.

In November, the ICJ delivered its decision. The central focus of the case was the reinterpretation of the 1962 declaration that awarded the temple to Cambodia (International Court of Justice 2013:18). Both Cambodia and Thailand had disputed the actual size of the territory and the location of the border; Cambodia argued the boundary was much further north of Preah Vihear than Thailand proposed, whereas Thailand saw the temple as the northern edge of Cambodian territory. After approximately five months, the ICJ reaffirmed the judgment of 1962 and declared that the promontory point belonged to Cambodia. However, the court rejected Cambodia's claim to Phnom Trap Hill, northeast of Preah Vihear. As a result, Thailand was obligated to withdraw its armed forces from the territory.

## Conclusion

The conflict with Thailand developed into an issue about protecting Cambodian heritage and its sovereignty; it was a battle between Cambodia and the 'other' Thailand. The government labelled Thailand as the enemy, contrasting it to Cambodians who wanted peace and to protect its territory, which included Preah Vihear. Hun Sen created an image of himself as a nationalist by defending the nation and all who lived in it. Similar to how Anderson viewed museums, the temple became a tangible object or space where the government sought to figuratively unite Cambodians (Anderson 1991: 141, 183–185). It was a site people could point to as being a part of themselves since the temple was Cambodian and so were they. The government promoted a history where people could connect with other Cambodians whom they had never had associations with (Anderson 1991: 11, 25). Hun Sen made the abstract idea of the nation or nationalism more concrete, or at least understandable, through the politicisation of the temple. The CPP also argued that Preah Vihear was worth defending. A threat to Preah Vihear was a direct attack on the country and all Cambodians. Through the efforts of Hun Sen and the CPP, Preah Vihear joined Angkor Wat and other Cambodian historical images as part of the country's identity, although not with the same stature.

The border conflict and Preah Vihear greatly benefitted Hun Sen because of its nationalistic function. The temple's growing popularity turned the site into a tourist attraction, the government increased land development to accommodate foreign visitors, and it garnered some economic revenue. When fighting broke out between Cambodia and Thailand, Hun Sen placed himself – along with his son – in a position

that bolstered their influences in the military. Hun Sen blamed the Thais and depicted them as obstructers of regional peace. Anti-Thai rhetoric was an easy political weapon. He won support when some Cambodians caught the fever of nationalism caused by the Preah Vihear conflict. However, others along the border did not have the same passion according to Kimly (quoted by Deth 2014a: 26). Kimly stated that some people in Preah Vihear province still supported some of the government's "nation-building projects" but were not completely converted to the "nationalist narrative" (Kimly 2016: 211). In addition, the Kui minority saw the development in the province as threatening to a way of life that they viewed as different from the Cambodian majority. Notwithstanding this division, sentiment was high among Cambodians in Phnom Penh and the CPP received much credit for defending the country. Preah Vihear and the country's territorial integrity were weaved into the nation's identity. Hun Sen's stubborn stance against Thailand's false claims to the temple made him a hero-like figure. The use of Preah Vihear and the border conflict in Hun Sen's politics over the previous 15 years had helped to gloss over a number of domestic problems. The country's temple heritage and territorial sensitivities helped Hun Sen to win elections and gain popularity among Cambodians.

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